

January 25, 2012 | by Leonard A. Leo and Rev. William Shaw

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<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bs-ed-nigeria-20120123,0,6743343.story>

Since the arrival of the New Year, America's Nigerian diaspora, including its significant community in Maryland, must be dismayed by the news from Africa's most populous country. The reluctance of Nigeria's government to prevent or punish violence between Muslims and Christians has invited further violations of religious freedom and losses of innocent life.

During the first week of January, in one day in Adamawa State in the north, at least 20 people were killed and 15 others wounded. The next day, eight worshipers attending the Apostolic Church in Adamawa were slain. Members or followers of Boko Haram, the terrorist group which killed hundreds in 2011 — including on Christmas Day in several church bombings — are suspected of being behind both atrocities.

The Adamawa bloodshed came after a demand by a purported Boko Haram representative that all Christians and southerners leave the north or face attack. It was followed by assaults on mosques and an Islamic school in the city of Benin in the south, leaving at least five people dead, and by the killing of four Christians fleeing the northern town of Maiduguri, which has been torn by Boko Haram's violence.

Over the years, violent religious actors, both Christian and Muslim, have literally gotten away with murder. Boko Haram is exploiting a climate of impunity in a country that has lost more than 13,000 people to religiously-related violence since 1999.

In a January 2011 meeting with a delegation from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), on which we serve, Nigerian officials highlighted five convictions on terrorism charges. Unfortunately, there have been no convictions of perpetrators of sectarian violence.

Compounding the problem, religious police called the Hisbah are funded by state governments in Bauchi, Zamfara, Niger, Kaduna, and Kano and enforce a number of sharia laws.

These religious freedom abuses and Nigeria's sectarian strife should arouse the conscience of the world, including the United States.

Yet Nigeria's problem isn't just a humanitarian one. Nigeria remains a pivotal leader in Africa,

a major exporter of oil, and a contributor to international peacekeeping operations. Its sectarian violence threatens the stability and viability of a country that is far too vital to be allowed to slide into eventual chaos and anarchy.

What can be done to turn Nigeria's tide?

First, Nigeria's religious leaders, both Muslim and Christian, should together condemn Boko Haram's atrocities as terrorist attacks which pour gasoline on sectarian flames. Religious leaders also must restrain their rhetoric, which divides Christians and Muslims further and stokes reprisal attacks.

Second, Nigeria's political establishment, including President Goodluck Jonathan and other leaders, should muster the will and courage not only to curb the strife but to bring all perpetrators to justice. That means seriously prosecuting them, regardless of their faith or position in society, and ensuring a speedy process which holds them accountable. Abuja must give state prosecutors more freedom and flexibility against offenders, rather than insisting on federal trials that result in holding the detained in the capital and releasing them a few months later.

Third, the United States should designate Nigeria a CPC or Country of Particular Concern, deeming it among the world's worst religious freedom violators for failing to prevent or contain religiously-connected violence, stop reprisal attacks, and convict the guilty. Ultimately, however,

Nigeria must do more than punish Boko Haram members and other extremists. It must also undermine their appeal by combating military and police abuse against Muslims and rolling back the nation's ethnic preferences system — in which persons originating from one state are denied benefits in others — which fuels charges of discrimination by Muslims and Christians alike.

Finally, the United States can make ending the culture of impunity a central issue in this week's U.S.-Nigeria Bi-National Commission meetings, while offering help to bolster Nigeria's community policing abilities, train prosecutors, and strengthen its judicial system.

During those meetings, security and stability will be critical issues. For the sake of these issues, as well as human life and religious freedom, Nigeria must confront its impunity problem now.

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